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THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PENSION QUESTION, 1885-1897 ¹

The period when the pension question excited the greatest interest in national politics was during the eighties and nineties. This was the time of transition from the declining issues of the civil war and reconstruction to the dominance of newer economic questions. Until these new issues forced themselves upon the attention of the public and of political leaders, local or personal matters held a position of greater prominence than at times when the public was aroused over questions of real national importance. For lack of more worthy competitors the ever-present "pork barrel" attained a position of undue eminence.² From this convenient receptacle of the public funds congressmen extracted increasing appropriations for rivers and harbors and public buildings, and much greater amounts for pensioning veterans of the civil war, to the advancement of their own political fortunes and to the disgust of many thoughtful observers.

The confusion in politics at a time when the voting strength of the two main parties was evenly balanced was reflected in the divided party control of the government. During most of this period party measures passed by one house of congress were sure to be killed in the other or to be vetoed by the president.³ There resulted a relatively large amount of debate that was a mere sparring for party advantage, without expectation that legislation would result from it. In these debates, pensions played an important part.⁴ Moreover, the quadrennial change

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Mississippi valley historical association at Madison, Wisconsin, April 15, 1921.

² Davis R. Dewey, *National problems, 1885-1897* (New York, 1907), 3; Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's autobiography, a personal narrative of political experience* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1913), 86; James Bryce, *The American commonwealth* (London, 1888), 1: 141.

³ Frederic L. Paxson, *The new nation (The riverside history of the United States, vol. 4 — New York, 1915)*, 77.

⁴ See Edward Stanwood, *A history of the presidency from 1798 to 1897* (Boston

in the control of the presidency afforded each party an opportunity to investigate and to advertise the misdeeds of the other in the pension bureau.

From 1884 to 1896 the platforms of the national parties showed unusual interest in pensions. During this period, most of the minor parties adopted pension planks. Some of these parties were organized about a single dominant issue, and when they mentioned other subjects it was only those considered most vital. The prohibitionist pension planks were especially significant of the intensity of the issue. If the amount of space allotted to various subjects in campaign textbooks may be taken as a rough indication of their effectiveness in winning votes, pensions were for a time the issue second in importance. In 1884 the republican textbook devoted more pages to pensions and the soldiers than to any other subject except the tariff. This was true of both republican and democratic campaign books in 1885.⁵

The period of the Cleveland and Harrison administrations, therefore, offers perhaps the best opportunity to study the forces that caused the development of the pension system. These forces include: (1) the soldier vote; (2) the Grand army of the republic; (3) the civil war sentiment and tradition that persisted in the north; (4) the Washington claim agents; (5) the soldier press; (6) the pension politicians; and (7) the relation of pensions to the tariff question.

In 1885 there were a million and a half survivors of the union armies, most of them in the northern states.⁶ In New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois they were twelve or fifteen per cent of the males of voting age. Only about one-sixth of them received pensions.⁷ They constituted a political

and New York, 1898), 419. For an excellent example of this sort of debate, see the debates on the pension appropriation bill, H. R. 5201, in *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, especially pp. 1792 ff., 1967 ff., 2011 ff., and 2045 ff.

⁵ *The republican campaign text-book for 1884* (compiled by George F. Dawson — New York, 1884); *The republican campaign text-book for 1888* (compiled by George F. Dawson — New York, 1888); *The campaign text-book of the democratic party of the United States for the presidential election of 1888* (New York, 1888).

⁶ For the statistics upon which these statements are based, see *Report of the commissioner of pensions*, 1890, p. 12; *Congressional record*, 51 congress, 1 session, p. 1797.

⁷ About twelve per cent in 1890, assuming that the distribution of the total num-

element that had a distinct class consciousness as a result of certain common interests, prominent among which was the pension question. In a period when elections were decided by small majorities, a voting element of these proportions was enough to cause serious concern among politicians if it could attain reasonable unanimity in regard to what it wanted and if it could make its wants known.

The principal channel through which the wants of the soldiers were made articulate was the Grand army of the republic. The votes of the national encampment of this order showed better than anything else what the comrades of the Grand army and the other soldiers desired. From 1881 on, the Grand army maintained an active lobby through its committee on pensions, which endeavored to procure from congress the legislation advocated by the organization.⁸ It was assumed by politicians that the soldier vote could be attracted by the party that made the more liberal grants of pensions, and it seems that a considerable part of it was so attracted.

The Grand army claimed to be a nonpolitical organization. It had strict rules against the use of the order for partisan purposes, and its officers made strenuous efforts to enforce them with at least technical correctness. But the Grand army could not avoid being a force in politics. Its members were voters, and while they did not necessarily cast their ballots in their capacity as comrades, their connection with the order obviously influenced their decisions in many cases when pensions or other matters of common interest to old soldiers were political questions.⁹

ber of ex-soldiers living in these states was in proportion to the distribution of pensioners. *Eleventh United States census, part 1, Population, 764; Report of the commissioner of pensions, 1890, pp. 38-50.*

⁸ *Journal of the sixteenth annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, held at Baltimore, Md., June 21, 22, 23, 1882* (Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1882), 871 ff; Robert B. Beath, *History of the Grand army of the republic. With an introduction by Gen. Lucius Fairchild* (New York, 1889), 180-182, 224, 225.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29, 101, 120, 142, 242; Robert B. Beath, *Grand army blue book* (Philadelphia, 1884), 115. The *National Tribune*, January 11, 1883, commenting upon a letter of a correspondent who urged the Grand army to "fill the places of such men as Beck [senator from Kentucky, who is denounced in this paper as a foe of the soldiers] with honest and honorable men, who believe in fulfilling the solemn contract with the savers of this mighty Republic," said: "The Grand army is not

The point is well illustrated by the predicament of Congressman Warner of Ohio, a democrat, who had difficulty in securing reelection in 1884. He maintained that his troubles were due to the activities of the republican commissioner of pensions, Colonel W. W. Dudley. Colonel Dudley has been described as "a most genial man personally, a brave soldier in the Civil War, who left a leg at Gettysburg," but "an old school politician — and practical." His bent for practical politics led him to take a leave of absence from the pension bureau in the fall of 1884 and to spend two months in Ohio and Indiana managing the republican campaign, using his official influence to accomplish the desired result. Many special examiners from the pension bureau were ordered to Ohio to assist in the work of delivering the soldier vote to the republicans. Democratic applicants for pensions later testified before a congressional committee that they had voted the republican ticket because Dudley's men had given them to understand that their claims would not be allowed if they did otherwise.¹⁰

Congressman Grosvenor of Ohio claimed that Dudley's activities had nothing to do with Warner's political disaster, but that it was due to Warner's action as chairman of the house committee on pensions, bounty, and back pay. The Grand army committee on pensions had appeared before Warner's committee, and it claimed to have received assurances from him that he favored certain amendments to a bill under consideration which were satisfactory to the Grand army. When the bill was reported, it was not altogether what the Grand army wanted. Grosvenor submitted for printing in the *Congressional record* letters, dated September 8, 1884, from three other members of the G. A. R. committee, General Wagner, General Merrill, and Corporal Tanner. Tanner's letter concluded:

Gentlemen like MR. WARNER must be taught that it is not to prove safe to play with soldiers' interests in the committee-rooms and on the floor of the House.

a political organization, and we trust will never become one; but individual members are at liberty to think and vote as they please, and it would indeed be strange if they did not cast their ballots against those who persistently and maliciously slander them."

¹⁰ La Follette, *Autobiography*, 78; John W. Oliver, *History of the civil war military pensions 1861-1885* (University of Wisconsin, *Bulletin* no. 884, History series, vol. 4, no. 1 — Madison, 1917), 109-116.

Every old soldier in that Congressional district owes it to the large number of his needy and suffering comrades in the country at large who look to us for assistance to make an example of WARNER and terminate his Congressional career now.

Hoping that result will be accomplished and earnestly advising every old soldier to participate in bringing it about,

I am, very truly yours,

JAS. TANNER.¹¹

The date and contents of these letters indicate that they were written for use in the election of 1884. It was being realized, as General Benjamin F. Butler told the Grand army in 1890, that if the old soldiers would act together, they could "make politicians dance like peas on a hot shovel."¹² In spite of the earnest efforts of many of the best members to save the order from becoming involved in politics, and in spite of a certain technical conformity to this ideal, the assertion that the Grand army of the republic was in no sense a political organization was entirely misleading.

In 1888 the service pension element that represented the selfish class interests of the soldiers gained control of the Grand army, and from this time on it engaged in exploiting the public esteem for the veterans to obtain largesses from the public treasury. The development of pension activity by the Grand army was contemporaneous with a rapid growth of membership, from 60,678 in 1880 to 269,689 in 1885, and 427,981 in 1890. At the latter date about one-third of the survivors of the war were members. No doubt this growth was caused in part by interest in the increasing activity of the organization in regard to pensions.¹³

¹¹ *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, pp. 2045-2046.

¹² *Unofficial proceedings in connection with the twenty-fourth national encampment of the Grand army of the republic, held in Boston, Aug. 11-16, 1890* (Boston, 1891), 205.

¹³ *Journal of the fifteenth annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, held at Indianapolis, Ind., June 15th and 16th, 1881* (Philadelphia, 1881), 761; *Journal of the nineteenth annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, Portland, Maine, June 24th and 25th, 1885* (Toledo, Ohio, 1885), 51; *Journal of the twenty-second annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, Columbus, Ohio, September 12th, 13th and 14th, 1888* (Minneapolis, 1888), 190; *Journal of the twenty-fourth annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, Boston, Mass., August 13th and 14th, 1890* (Detroit, 1890), 19.

The persistence of civil war traditions and sentiments through this period led many citizens other than the soldiers to think and feel in terms of the war as much as the soldiers themselves did. Throughout the northern states a large part of the public believed in giving the veterans what they wanted so far as the means of the government enabled it to do so. Appeals to the soldier vote were all the more effective because of the response to them by other classes of citizens. The feeling that the men who had saved the nation deserved well of the public led not only to liberal grants of pensions, but also to the election of soldiers to office out of all proportion to their numbers. In the forty-ninth congress, elected in 1884, more than a third of the representatives from the northern and border states were union veterans.¹⁴ In such a congress matters of interest to the soldiers were likely to receive plenty of attention.

The effect of the sentimental side of the pension question appeared in the working theory of pension legislation adopted by congress. Congressional orators of the eighties and later were accustomed to assert that the particular laws that they advocated were required to satisfy the terms of a contract made with the soldiers when they enlisted. At the end of the war, so one version of the argument ran, the government had two kinds of creditors: the soldiers, who had risked their lives, and the bondholders, who had risked merely their money. Tables were produced comparing the amounts paid to bondholders with the amounts paid to pensioners, to show that the soldiers had not received their due.¹⁵ This so-called contract had consisted

¹⁴ *Congressional directory*, 49 congress, 1 session. Where the biographies in the *Directory* are incomplete, the *Congressional biographical dictionary* has been used.

¹⁵ In a single session of congress, one form or another of this argument was used by Senator Teller, formerly secretary of the interior, *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, p. 4504; by Senator Hoar, *ibid.*, 1549; by Senator Blair, *ibid.*, 4460; by Representative William McKinley, *ibid.*, 6024; by Representative Townshend, *ibid.*, 1793, and by others. In the *Report of the commissioner of pensions*, 1885, p. 57, a table is printed to show that the soldiers had been underpaid; since the war they had received less than \$800,000,000, while the bondholders had received more than \$2,200,000,000. Secretary of the interior L. Q. C. Lamar, referring to this table, said: "So long as the premium paid to those who contributed the money exceeds that paid to the defenders of the country, I think the complaint of excessive pensions is not well founded." *Report of the secretary of the interior*, 1885, in *House executive documents*, 49 congress, 1 session, no. 1, part 5, p. 57.

of nothing more than the informal assurances by orators, the press, or other organs of popular expression, that the injured soldiers and the dependents of the slain would be cared for by the government.¹⁶ If the people had made promises, perhaps the people's representatives were under a certain moral obligation to fulfill them, but to call this sort of thing a contract was absurd. The supreme court held that a pension was merely a gratuity which the government might modify or revoke at will.¹⁷ Yet the idea that more and greater pensions were a contractual obligation, or at least that they were necessary to pay the "debt of gratitude" due the soldiers, was so frequently expressed in congress and by so many prominent public men, that it seems to have been the dominant theory upon which congress acted.¹⁸ It was therefore much more important in determining the course of pension legislation than the legal theory was.

The selfish interests of the soldiers who wanted pensions, the kindly sympathy of other soldiers for their unfortunate comrades who needed assistance, and the gratitude of the public to the veterans, were exploited by self-seeking individuals who hoped to profit by additional pension legislation. The claim agents, whose fees depended upon extension of the laws and

¹⁶ President Hayes, in a private letter explaining his reasons for signing the arrears of the pension act of 1879, said: "That act was required by good faith. The soldiers had the pledge of the Government and the people. Congress, State Legislatures, messages, the press — everybody assured the soldier that if disabled in line of duty he would be pensioned." Charles Richard Williams, *The life of Rutherford Birchard Hayes, nineteenth president of the United States* (Boston and New York, 1914), 2:338, quoted in Oliver, *Civil war pensions*, 59-60. See also *Congressional record*, 50 congress, 1 session, p. 3173. If there were any assurances by congress, they must have been of an informal nature. If there had been any that were legally binding, they would hardly have escaped being quoted in the debates of the eighties.

¹⁷ *Digest of United States supreme court reports*, 4483; *Walton v. Cotton*, 19 *Howard*, 355; *United States ex rel Barnett v. Teller*, 107 U. S., 64. Senator Blair specifically contradicted the legal theory as follows: "True, it may be said, and often is said, that pensions are a gift, and that they may be conferred, revoked, or wholly refused, even after service rendered or disability contracted while the law specifically provided for them; but no one can seriously claim this, save on the ground that if the nation becomes too poor to carry the burden of taxation, then the obligation may be repudiated; just as in like case the individual is discharged in bankruptcy, so the state may refuse from necessity to pay its debts." *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, p. 4460.

¹⁸ See Albert Bushnell Hart, *National ideals historically traced* (*The American nation*, vol. 26 — New York, 1907), 281.

upon liberal practices of the pension bureau, worked upon the Grand army and other soldier organizations. They frequently held important offices in the order. They exerted a sinister force upon both legislation and administration. The concentration of large firms of pension attorneys in the city of Washington placed them in a strategic position either to lobby bills through congress or to exert pressure upon officials of the pension office. The largest firm of this kind was that of George E. Lemon. Although Lemon was known to have been concerned in the most unsavory scandals in the pension bureau, and although his activities were repeatedly investigated, he continued his work with impunity. The newspapers published in the interests of the old soldiers were an important element in influencing the soldier vote. They were numerous and of various kinds, but by far the most important was the *Washington National Tribune*, the official organ of the Grand army. It was owned and edited by George E. Lemon, who used it as a means of bringing the veterans to want what was good for the business of the claim agents. Through these means claim agents worked indirectly upon the opinions of the public at large.¹⁹ Political demagogues advocated extravagant pension laws in order to attract the more mercenary part of the soldier vote. They also

¹⁹ Oliver, *Civil war pensions*, 44, 49-50, 99-101. For the investigations by congressional committees involving Lemon, see *House reports*, 48 congress, 2 session, no. 2683; 51 congress, 2 session, no. 3732; 52 congress, 1 session, no. 1868. In 1882 in recognition of Lemon's services in organizing new posts and in helping comrades establish pension claims, the commander in chief of the G. A. R. appointed Lemon his aide-de-camp. *Journal of the seventeenth annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, Denver, Col., July 25, 1883* (Omaha, Neb., 1883), 223. The *National Tribune* was especially active in having petitions to congress favoring pension legislation sent from G. A. R. posts. See editorials in every number for December, 1884, and January, 1885. It also utilized other soldiers' organizations. In 1887 John McElroy, of the *National Tribune* staff, presided over a meeting of the National association of ex-prisoners of war at Chicago. *Clinton (Iowa) Weekly Herald*, September 29, 1887. Senator Vest said that the flood of petitions in favor of pension legislation came not from the soldiers but from the claim agents, and that the military organizations of the country were being used by these "legal cormorants" to make private fortunes and raids on the treasury. *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, p. 4502. See also *ibid.*, 49 congress, 2 session, pp. 2213-2216; *Harper's weekly*, 31:934; *New York Tribune*, February 8, 1887. The *Grand Army Advocate* (Des Moines) and the *Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph* are examples of local papers published for the benefit of the veterans.

frequently worked up their political fortunes from within the Grand army, as comrades or officers of the organization.

The importance of the pension question was augmented by its relation to the tariff. The presence of a surplus in the treasury encouraged extravagant expenditures. The surplus might have been avoided by a reduction of the taxes, but tariff reformers encountered the opposition of two strongly organized groups, the protected manufacturers and the soldiers. These two sets of interests supplemented each other. If the tariff was kept up, the money had to be spent to avoid hoarding the circulating medium. Pensions were the largest item in the government expenditures, and increases were demanded by an important political element whose support could presumably be bought by the party that was responsible for the larger pension appropriations.²⁰

The republican party was strongest in the region that contained most of the protected manufacturers and soldiers. The party naturally felt strongly the sentimental side of the pension question. But the strength of the soldier vote, and the relation of pensions to the tariff when the tariff became the principal issue, explain why the party went so much farther in pension legislation than sentiment alone would have carried it.

The democratic party favored tariff reduction. Northern democrats were embarrassed by a conflict of interests. If they

²⁰ E. G. Bourne, *History of the surplus revenue of 1837* (New York, 1885), 1-2; Carman F. Randolph, "Surplus revenue," in *Political science quarterly*, 3:234. The reports of the secretary of the treasury show that in every year from 1885 to 1897 pensions were the largest single item in the ordinary expenditures of the government. In 1885 they were eighteen per cent of the total. In 1893, the year which, during the period under consideration, marked the greatest appropriation both for pensions and for all other purposes, they were thirty-five per cent of the total. *Report of the secretary of the treasury*, 1885, p. vi; *ibid.*, 1893, p. xxvii. The ordinary expenditures did not include that part of the surplus applied to the extinguishment of the public debt.

For examples of protectionist speeches on pension bills in congress see *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, pp. 787, 1797, 1798. The attitude of those interested primarily in pension increases toward reduction of taxes is illustrated by editorials in the *National Tribune*, December 21, 28, 1882, January 20, 1887, May 10, 1888. For statements of the alleged advantages of distributing the surplus among pensioners see *Congressional record*, 48 congress, 1 session, pp. 457, 458; 49 congress, 1 session, p. 4668; *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), January 2, 1887.

spent money for pensions and so made it more difficult to lower the tariff, they might gain the soldier vote but they would offend tariff reformers. If they reduced the revenues there would be less money for pensions; this would please the "free traders," but offend the soldiers.²¹ Although northern democrats did what they could to attract the soldier vote, they worked at a disadvantage, and the republicans derived the greater political benefit from this phase of the pension issue.

Congressmen from the northern states could never remain long unconscious of the pension question because routine work connected with this subject occupied a very large portion of their time. In addition to the necessity of looking up the claims of their constituents before the pension bureau, there was the work of passing special legislation. A newspaper account of the work of the forty-ninth congress, just before the end of the first session, showed that forty per cent of the bills introduced in the house and fifty-five per cent of those introduced in the senate were private pension bills. The business of congress was impeded because the calendars were filled with these bills. They were usually rushed through at poorly attended sessions as fast as the titles could be read, without debate. Many ill-considered acts were passed in this way.²²

President Cleveland undertook to examine into the merits of these bills so far as possible, and to veto those that he considered

²¹ This led democrats to propose various schemes to pay pensions by special taxes, the proceeds of which were to be devoted entirely to this purpose; an income tax was the favorite method suggested. *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, pp. 789, 2405, 4072, 4675, 6021, 6024.

²² *Clinton Weekly Herald*, August 5, 1886. Senator La Follette states that during his congressional service he had to spend from a quarter to a third of his time looking up pension cases for old soldiers in his district, not including work on private pension bills. La Follette, *Autobiography*, 84. Congressmen were so burdened with correspondence relating to pensions that many who could afford it hired private secretaries to attend to it. *House reports*, 52 congress, 1 session, no. 1868, p. xx; *New York Herald*, February 7, 1887. In 1907 William P. Hepburn estimated that he had received 50,000 letters relating to pensions during his congressional career. John E. Briggs, *William Peters Hepburn* (*Iowa biographical series*, edited by Benjamin F. Shambaugh—Iowa City, 1919), 168. See also *Clinton Weekly Herald*, February 23, April 12, June 14, June 28, September 20, 1888; *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 1 session, p. 4504; *New York Times*, August 7, 12, 1888; *Fayette County* (Iowa) *Union*, April 10, 17, 1888; *A compilation of the messages and papers of the presidents, 1789-1897* (edited by James D. Richardson—Washington, 1896-1899), 8:437.

objectionable. During the first three and a half years of his administration he vetoed 191 and approved 1,369, more than two-thirds as many as had been signed by all his predecessors since 1861. The vetoes were based upon certain definite principles: that private pension acts should conform to the same principles as the general laws, that they were justifiable only in worthy cases lacking in technical proof, that the pension roll should be a roll of honor, unsullied by fraud or by the inclusion of unworthy individuals, and that the decisions of the pension bureau should stand unless there were strong reasons to the contrary. The veto messages can hardly be taken to indicate that Cleveland was hostile or unsympathetic toward the soldiers, but the mere fact of the vetoes led to the charge that he was their enemy. His criticisms of the slipshod methods of congress and his ironical remarks about some of the most flagrant cases aroused unnecessary opposition.²³

The feeling that Cleveland was the enemy of the veterans was aggravated by the veto of the dependent bill in 1887. This was a proposition to pension disabled and dependent soldiers whether their disabilities originated in the military service or not. It had passed both houses by large majorities, supported by all the republicans, and by the greater part of the northern and border state democrats.²⁴ The measure aroused unusual opposition from a large part of the republican and independent press as well as the democratic newspapers,²⁵ and enough northern and border state democrats changed their votes to sustain the veto.²⁶ This checked, for the rest of Cleveland's term, the movement to distribute the surplus among the soldiers.

²³ *Report of the commissioner of pensions*, 1888, p. 6 ff; *Messages of the presidents* (Richardson ed.), 8: 360, 437, 438, 443, 523, 525, 546; *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 2 session, p. 1639.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 742-743, 1076, 1638-1639.

²⁵ See *Public opinion*, 2:393-397, for a collection of editorial statements about the bill and veto. For newspaper comments opposed to the bill and supporting the veto, see *Chicago Times*, February 12, 1887; *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1887; *Des Moines Leader*, February 18, 22, 1887; *Harper's weekly*, 31:142; *Nation*, 44:131, 136; *New York Herald*, February 12, 13, 21, 1887. For adverse criticisms of the veto, see *Iowa State Register*, February 13, 1887; *National Tribune*, February 17, 1887; *New York Tribune*, February 12, 14, 1887; *Philadelphia American*, 13: 275.

²⁶ *Congressional record*, 49 congress, 2 session, p. 2226. All of the twenty-eight members who changed their votes from yea to nay were democrats. If the size of the vote was an indication of the congressional estimate of the importance of the measure, this was the most important bill during this session of congress. Only

It did not, however, end Cleveland's difficulties with the veterans. The excitement over the dependent bill had hardly subsided when Cleveland issued an order for the return to the southern states of some confederate battle flags that were in the possession of the war department. This raised a tempest of disapproval among those who were still willing to fight the war over again with verbal weapons. The president was threatened with insult if he attended the St. Louis encampment of the G. A. R. and he withdrew his previous acceptance of an invitation to be present. This affair, said the *New York Nation*, "was seized with avidity as the occasion for cursing, but the real cause was the pension veto. It is a question of dollars and cents that stands between the implacables and the President." But there are abundant evidences of sectional feeling in many parts of the north, independent of pensions, which contributed quite as much to the acuteness of the pension question as the vetoes contributed to this prejudice. It is doubtful if a republican president who stood well with the soldiers could have returned the flags in 1887, as Roosevelt did in 1905, without serious opposition. At any rate, the flag episode, so far as it tended to throw the soldier vote into the hands of the republicans, had much the same effect upon the political future of the pension question as the vetoes had.²⁷

In the election of 1888 Cleveland was opposed by a soldier candidate who assured the veterans of his esteem. Republican campaign orators like "Corporal" Tanner went about "representing Cleveland as an inhuman monster and Benjamin Harrison as an angel of mercy carrying a purse hanging mouth downward." Tanner said afterwards that he had "plastered Indiana with promises" that more money would be paid out for pensions if Harrison won the election.²⁸

eighteen failed to vote yea or nay. On Morrison's motion to reconsider the tariff, there had been nineteen not voting. *Ibid.*, p. 270. In only two other cases was the not voting list less than fifty. This confirms the impression gained from other sources that from the point of view of congressional politics the pension question at times held a place of importance equal to that of the tariff, and above all other subjects.

²⁷ Donald L. McMurry, "The soldier vote in Iowa in the election of 1888," in *Iowa journal of history and politics*, 18: 343 ff.; *Nation*, 45: 21; James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from Hayes to McKinley, 1877-1896* (*History of the United States from the compromise of 1850*, vol. 8 — New York, 1919), 304.

²⁸ McMurry, "The soldier vote," in *Iowa journal of history and politics*, 18: 353; *New York Times*, June 19, October 21, 1889; *New York Herald*, October 21, 1889.

The vote in Indiana was expected to be almost evenly divided, and it was in this doubtful state that the pension issue was most emphasized. Some observers thought that the "floating vote," easily amenable to corruption, would determine the result, and that the party that had more two dollar bills would triumph.²⁹ Others saw another solution of the difficulty, among them General Alvin P. Hovey, a candidate for the governorship, and one of the group of republican politicians who had made the service pension issue the principal means of obtaining their seats in the house of representatives.³⁰ He explained to a reporter that the soldiers held the balance of power in Indiana. He estimated that there were about 70,000 of them in the state, of whom perhaps 20,000 had voted for Cleveland in 1884, when the republicans had a civilian candidate. But, he inquired, "What can they offer as an excuse for voting for the civilian, the pension vetoer, against a good soldier [in 1888]?" He emphasized the need of a soldier to head the state ticket. At the republican state convention Hovey was nominated on the first ballot, after an orator had described him as the Logan of Indiana, the man

²⁹ *New York Times*, October 25, 1888; *Chicago Times*, October 2, 1888; *Nation*, 47: 365. It was in this campaign that the former commissioner of pensions, Colonel W. W. Dudley, who had used his bureau as a political machine in 1884, acquired further notoriety as "Blocks of five Dudley" because of a part of his letter to campaign managers in Indiana which read, "Divide the floaters into blocks of five, and put a trusted man with the necessary funds in charge of these five, and make him responsible that none get away and that all vote our ticket." *New York Times*, October 31, 1888; *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1888.

³⁰ At the national encampment of the G. A. R. in 1887, in reply to Hannibal Hamlin's assertion that a service pension was unpopular with the country at large, Comrade Johnston of Indiana said: "I may go into the rural districts . . . and tramp up and down the Wabash valley, taking the soldiers as they come, and nine out of every ten, Democrat and Republican, are in favor of a service pension bill. . . . Let me give you a little piece of history. The gallant Gen. Hovey of Indiana, Captain White of Fort Wayne, and myself represent three districts in Indiana, and in each of these districts the majority against us is twelve to fifteen hundred. We held a Council of War. We declared in favor of a universal pension. Our opponents were foolish enough to fall into the trap and oppose it. Hovey carried his district by fourteen hundred majority, Captain White carried his by over twelve hundred, and I carried mine by eleven hundred and fifty. When I talk, I am talking for the men who represent the rank and file of the Grand Army." *Journal of the twenty-first annual session of the national encampment, Grand army of the republic, St. Louis, Missouri, September 28th, 29th and 30th, 1887* (Milwaukee, 1887), 231-232.

who could "tear the mask from Courtland C. Matson and show the soldiers his hypocrisy."³¹

Colonel Matson, the democratic candidate, was the chairman of the house committee on invalid pensions. Shortly before the democratic convention, while Matson was in Indiana repairing his political fences, one of his friends had reported on his behalf from this committee a substitute for the so-called "Grand army pension bill" that had already passed the senate. The substitute proposed a service pension of a type that had no chance of passing the house. The report that accompanied the bill bore all the earmarks of an economical bid for political support. The bill contained only a limited application of the principle of the per diem service pension, but the report tried to arouse in the soldiers great expectations of future democratic legislation if the principle of the bill were once established. The house then witnessed an auction for the soldier vote of Indiana. Since the state platforms of both parties favored service pensions, the result seemed to depend upon the attitude of the candidates. Matson proposed an expensive measure to pay arrears to pensioners, and Hovey bid almost everything else in the way of extravagant pension legislation that had been thought of at the time.³²

The difficult dilemma of northern democrats in regard to the pension question now appeared in Matson's predicament, for he had maneuvered himself and his party into an embarrassing situation.³³ The Mills bill for the reduction of the tariff was before the house, and its advocates feared pension expendi-

³¹ *Indianapolis Journal*, July 21, August 9, 1888.

³² *House reports*, 50 congress, 1 session, nos. 1694, 2120; *Congressional record*, 50 congress, 1 session, p. 2969; 51 congress, 1 session, pp. 3171, 4089, 7176, appendix, pp. 378-382; *National Tribune*, April 19, 26, 1888.

³³ The *National Tribune*, May 31, 1888, stated Matson's dilemma very clearly:

"1. He is in favor of the Mills Bill, which proposes to reduce the revenues of the Government to an amount only sufficient to meet actual running expenses.

"2. He has reported the Arrears of Pension Bill, which he says will take \$25,000,000 out of the Treasury.

"3. If the Mills Bill passes there will be no money with which to pay arrears of pensions, or any other increase of the pension roll.

"4. If the Arrears of Pension Bill passes first, the reduction of revenue by the Mills bill is simply impossible.

"Now, which bill is he in favor of first?"

tures that would decrease the surplus and the need for tax reduction. Matson's action threatened to put them in a position where they must either endanger tariff reform or vote unequivocally against pension bills.³⁴ The *Indianapolis Journal* contrasted Matson's promises to the soldiers with his meager record of performance. "As chairman," it said, "he is opposed to pension legislation because of his fear of Grover Cleveland, but as a candidate he is in favor of it all."³⁵ Hovey had the advantage that his party was in the minority in the house, which enabled him to blame the democrats for the failure to pass his bills. He promised more, with less reserve, and he won the election.

Harrison carried the state of New York, although Hill, the democratic candidate, was elected governor at the same time, a situation that led to the charge that Hill was guilty of a corrupt bargain. But the New York G. A. R. had been especially active in the service pension agitation, and the hostility of the veterans to Cleveland, as Professor Glasson has plausibly suggested, might have accounted wholly or in part for this result. Throughout the north each party made strenuous efforts to prove that it was the better friend of the soldiers, with the advantage in favor of the republicans so far as the more mercenary part of the soldier vote was concerned. It is not at all improbable that enough voters were affected in this way to determine the result of the election.³⁶

The republican victory in 1888 brought into power a president and majorities in both houses of congress pledged to do something for the soldiers. Harrison appointed as commissioner of pensions "Corporal" James Tanner, the legless mem-

³⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, June 5, June 20, 1888. The republicans maneuvered to get Matson's bill considered and make Matson show his hand. Mills was reported to have said that he would rather block the reports of other important committees than allow pensions to come up for discussion.

³⁵ *Indianapolis Journal*, August 30, 1888.

³⁶ William Henry Glasson, *Federal military pensions in the United States* (edited by David Kinley, Carnegie endowment for international peace, division of economics and history—New York, 1918), 225; *Journal of the twenty-second national encampment, G. A. R., 1888*, 128, 157, 158; McMurtry, "The soldier vote," in *Iowa journal of history and politics*, 18: 351 ff.; *New York Tribune*, October 28, November 4, 1888; *New York Times*, October 5, 30, November 1, 1888; *Indianapolis Journal*, August 3, October 20, 27, 29, 30, November 1, 3, 5, 6, 1888.

ber of the Grand army pension committee. Tanner made the mistake of trying to fulfill campaign pledges literally. The press was soon full of the efforts of this unbalanced enthusiast to convert the pension bureau into a conduit from the treasury to the pockets of the veterans. In spite of criticism and warnings he promised to persevere, although, he said, he might "wring from the hearts of some the prayer, 'God help the surplus revenue.' " His irrepressible talkativeness and his insubordination soon got him into trouble. "What could have been more indiscreet," inquired a former colleague on the Grand army pension committee, "than the style in which he mounted the housetop and summoned the people of the United States to watch him while he made the wheels go round, or while he pulled a string and dangled the Secretary of the Interior at the other end?" He was removed after six months in office, but not until he had done great damage to his party. His successor, whose administration was less noisy and picturesque but in some respects more scandalous, added to the republican embarrassment.³⁷

To some reformers Tanner appeared to be only a grotesque personification of certain undesirable elements in his party.³⁸ A speech by President Eliot of Harvard in October, 1889, was a significant indication of the effect upon thoughtful and independent voters. He gave three reasons for his change from the republican to the democratic party: the republican tariff, the civil service records of Cleveland and Harrison, and the republican record on pensions. In regard to the last he said:

I hold it to be a hideous wrong inflicted upon the republic that the pension system instituted for the benefit of the soldiers and sailors of the United States has been prostituted and degraded by the whole series of Republican administrations. As things are, Gentlemen, one cannot tell whether a pensioner of the United States received an honorable wound in battle or contracted a chronic catarrh twenty years after the war. One cannot tell whether a

³⁷ *Public opinion*, 7: 46, 76, 118, 267, 268, 447, 448, 486; *Nation*, 48: 439, 51: 203, 238; *New York Times*, August 3, 4, 10, September 13, October 21, 1889; *Report of the secretary of the interior*, 1889, in *House executive documents*, 51 congress, 1 session, no. 1, part 5, pp. 68 ff., 152 ff.; *House reports*, 51 congress, 2 session, no. 3732; 52 congress, 1 session, no. 1868.

³⁸ *New York Times*, September 12, 13, 1889.

pensioner of the United States is a disabled soldier or sailor or a perjured pauper who has foisted himself upon the public treasury. I say that to put the pension system of the United States into this condition is a crime against all honest soldiers and against Republican institutions; and it is a Republican administration which has brought that system to this condition, the present administration being the worst of all. . . . Gentlemen, if I had no other motive for changing my party, I would do everything in my power by word and act to get the chance to vote again for Grover Cleveland for President, because he bravely did what he could to restore the pension system of our country to the honorable respect of its soldiers and citizens.³⁹

The passage of the expensive pension law of June 27, 1890, made matters worse. It did more to deplete the treasury than "surplus buster" Tanner could have done if he had remained in office.⁴⁰ In this act, as in the McKinley tariff, the republicans overshot the mark. There were protests from the same groups that had objected to the dependent bill in 1887. This law and the scandals affected especially the mugwump type of voter. Moreover, the connection between increased pension expenditures and the growing embarrassment of the treasury was obvious. The pension question, as well as the tariff, therefore, was a potent force contributing to the republican defeats of 1890 and 1892.⁴¹

In the election of 1896, minor parties as well as the major ones still had pension planks in their platforms, perhaps from force of habit; but the press gave no such attention to the subject as it had displayed in 1888, or even in 1892.⁴² The period when the public had been most interested centered about the veto of the dependent bill in 1887, the election of 1888, Tanner's brief

³⁹ *President Eliot's speech at the Bay State club, Oct. 12, 1889* (Boston, 1889), pp. 3-4.

⁴⁰ For an account of this law and its operation see William Henry Glasson, "A costly pension law: act of June 27, 1890," in *South Atlantic quarterly*, 3: 361 ff; Edward F. Waite, "Pensions: the law and its administration," in *Harper's new monthly magazine*, 86: 240 ff.

⁴¹ *Public opinion*, 9: 288, 314, 474; 10: 197.

⁴² For editorial extracts on the pension question in the election of 1892, see *Public opinion*, 14: 4, 46, 54, 76, 78. The decline of interest in the subject is illustrated by the fact that the indexes to *Public opinion* and the *Nation* for 1896 disclose only a single reference to pensions in each periodical.

but spectacular administration, and the act of 1890. After the panic of 1893 there was no surplus to distribute, and Cleveland was spared the necessity of further vetoes. With the disappearance of the surplus and the emergence of the absorbing free silver question, pensions declined to the position of a minor issue, of more interest to professional vote getters and to the expectant beneficiaries than to the public at large.

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